

# **Pictures In Dispute: Documentary Photography in Sandinista Nicaragua**

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# **Pictures In Dispute: Documentary Photography in Sandinista Nicaragua<sup>1</sup>**

The need for political participation felt in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution, and the widespread mobilization of photography to political ends during this period intersected with postmodern theory in a global arena. While U.S. based critiques of the documentary genre have been duly analysed in the relevant literature, related conversations taking place in Latin America have only been marginally explored. This article posits that so-called postmodern discourses in fact created the basis for a horizontal, transnational and multi-centred, rather than vertical (North—South) dynamic between these photographic communities. Through their commitment to politics, and to avant-garde aesthetics, documentary photographers performed gestures of cultural and visual appropriation, fitting their itinerant context. Here I analyse the work of Claudia Gordillo, taking as a case study Nicaragua during the 1980s.

Keywords: documentary; politics; aesthetics; Nicaragua; Sandinista; revolution.

## **Towards a Decentred Critique of Documentary Photography**

In the decades following the Cuban Revolution, in response to the war in Vietnam and to intensifying anti-colonial movements around the world, numerous photographers from the United States and from Europe traveled to Latin America to document, as well as to witness the momentous social and political movements then underway. In Latin America, as *fotógrafos comprometidos* or committed photographers, practitioners looked at developments both within and outside the region, striving to

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build a sense of solidarity with their political and social demands through visual means. Powerful networks of exchange ensued, often independent of both media channels and governmental or extra-governmental institutions. The Sandinista Revolution (1978-1990) and the Contra War (circa 1980-1990) were amongst the most extensively documented conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century. The great *mass* of photographic documentation that was produced in Nicaragua and in associated ‘hotspots’ in Central America, contributed, one might argue, to an expanding cultural awareness of warfare waged on a global scale—intrinsic to a process that Paul Virilio would characterize during this period as converging towards ‘pure war’, conditioned by technological determinism. Even though digital technologies were yet to interweave the globe, the spread of information, and disinformation about these conflicts by analog means was already playing out in an all-seeing networked visual environment.

While civil liberties in Latin America continued to be repressed by authoritarian regimes, the Sandinista movement was perceived as the last revolution that was possible (or achievable) in the hemisphere. By the mid-1980s, amongst politically engaged photographers there was consensus that the U.S.-supported Contra war had provoked a humanitarian crisis, one that to the North American public was disguised as a legitimate fight against international Communism, and the intervention of Cuba and the U.S.S.R. in the Central American region. How these witnesses portrayed the conflict had tremendous impact on the devastating decade-long hostilities and on the controversial peace process that concluded with the Sandinista defeat during the 1990 elections. Their photographs and the accompanying testimonies significantly altered outside knowledge about the war, and subverted how the conflict had been presented by Reaganite ideologues.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While a great number of foreign photographers travelled to Nicaragua on assignment for various agencies and news organizations, they nonetheless sought to present their work in

Concerns around the representation and misrepresentation of the Central American conflicts coincided with the rise of dialogues at an international level on ethics, politics and aesthetics in relation to photographic practices. Images of conflict have been commonly contextualized in relation to the history of photojournalism (predominantly Western) and social documentary, placed within subcategories such as ‘concerned’ photography, politically-committed or militant photography and intersecting with broader fields that include human rights, humanitarianism and even conceptual art. In terms of critical theory and historiography, the late 1970s and 1980s mark a defining moment in the history of photography, concurrent with the emergence of postmodernism, whereby images of conflict came to the foreground of debates around image-making practices. One might argue indeed that it was the urgency of such *extreme pictures* that pushed aesthetic discourses into these more engaged, even if problematic directions.

The importance of social and political commitment over formal aesthetics remained one of the most hotly discussed topics from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, in-between Latin America and the United States. While U.S. based critiques of documentary centered around the work of Martha Rosler (1981) and Alan Sekula (1978, 1981) have been duly analyzed in the relevant literature, important connections with related conversations taking place in Latin America have only been marginally explored. For instance, the impact of encounters such as those facilitated by the *Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía*—most prominently the suite of photography colloquia which were held in

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alternative formats subsequently. Photobooks were a preferred genre due to their accessibility and portability. Notable examples include: Meyer, Pedro, Pedro Valtierra, et al. *Cuadernos de Uno más Uno: La batalla por Nicaragua*. México D.F.: Uno más Uno, 1980. Meiselas, Susan. *Nicaragua June 1978—July 1979*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981. Cross, Richard, et al. *Nicaragua: la guerra de liberación*. Managua: Ministerio de Cultura, 1982. Gordillo, Claudia. *Nicaragua sandinista: frammenti di una rivoluzione*. Napoli: L’Alfabeto Urbano, Edizione Sintesi, 1987. Towell, Larry. *Somoza’s Last Stand, Testimonies from Nicaragua*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1990.

Mexico City in 1978 and 1981, and in Havana in 1984—was deeply felt by several generations of documentary makers, as international groups of practitioners and critics debated the relation between photography and political change. The theorization of postmodernism, in its North American and European acceptance, did not enter these circles unproblematically. In fact, one might argue that practitioners throughout Latin American struggled with this category, and only reluctantly accepted it. Perhaps the language of postmodernism, not unlike the language of postwar Western documentary, remained all too specific to the geography of its origins. At the same time, due to the laxity of the term (at least conceptually), certain common ground could be found between practitioners situated on many sides of such conflicting contemporaneous debates.

Much remains to be said about the great ‘flourishing’ of documentary practices and approaches during this period, perhaps due to the massive pressures, political and otherwise, encroaching upon photographers from all sides. In this text, I turn to the Sandinista revolutionary movement in Nicaragua, in order to explore the various functions that documentary photography performed in the context of armed and ideological conflict there. Seen from an international perspective, U.S. photographer Susan Meiselas has produced the most influential body of photographic work documenting the revolution. Meiselas’ interest in the subject was undoubtedly political, in that she positioned herself as a *witness* rather than as a neutral observer. This attitude resonated with a great number of photographers working in the aftermath of the 1960s countercultural movements, and the upheavals of 1968, a generation that saw their task as documentarians asserting ideological beliefs, whereby photographs would record one’s contemporary reality in as much as they were to advance progressive change. Of the Nicaraguan photographers active during this period, less known internationally than their North American and European counterparts, photographer Claudia Gordillo has produced

perhaps the most substantial body of documentary work around the Sandinista Revolution. In what follows I will trace the deployment of her photographs in official settings, highlighting, by comparison, the development of a distinctive sociological perspective and aesthetic vocabulary in her independent work.

### **The Ideological Debate**

Following her return from Europe soon after the revolutionary victory of July 19, 1979, Gordillo began to photograph the urban landscape of Managua, seeking to re-acquaint herself with the specificity of the place, and with a culture that had undergone dramatic change during the two years she had spent abroad.<sup>3</sup> Eight years after the 1972 earthquake that devastated the city, destroying most of its historic architecture, she photographed the view from her father's office building, located in what previously was the city's bustling center (Figure 1). 'Cuando yo tenía dieciocho años desapareció Managua' (when I was eighteen Managua disappeared), she explained in an interview (Gordillo).<sup>4</sup> In the background of the picture one notices the solitary towers of Managua's Old Cathedral grazing the overcast sky. Nearby, a few scattered buildings lay abandoned, fallen in disrepair, in a cityscape devoured by tropical vegetation. In the foreground a tamer potted plant leans precariously over the balcony's ledge, inconclusive proof of habitation within this dystopian metropolitan scene.

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<sup>3</sup> The Somoza dictatorship was toppled by a coalition of forces under the leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional or FSLN). Having studied sociology at the Universidad Centroamericana in Managua until 1975, Gordillo moved to Rome in 1977 to pursue a degree in art and art history at the Scuola Libera, Accademia di Belle Arti, and later a course in photography at the Istituto Europeo di Design.

<sup>4</sup> All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.



Figure 1. Claudia Gordillo, Centro histórico de Managua, 1980. © Claudia Gordillo

Gordillo's first exhibition opened August 12, 1982 at the Casa de Cultura 'Fernando Gordillo', a state-sponsored gallery in Managua run by the Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers (Trejos 5).<sup>5</sup> As part of her larger project documenting the Managuan cityscape, she presented a series of twenty-three black and white photographs of the Old Cathedral damaged and abandoned since the earthquake, all taken between 1980 and 1981 (Figure 2), and thirteen thematically unrelated pictures. The sense of perspective found in the earlier panoramic view (Figure 1) was now replaced by a sequence of tight shots and close-ups of the monument's interior.

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<sup>5</sup> The *Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores de la Cultura* (Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers or ASTC) and the *Unión Nicaragüense de fotógrafos* (Nicaraguan Photographer's Union or UFN, founded in 1982) administered all official photography related activities in Nicaragua during the 1980s, from production to distribution, whether for the national media or otherwise. Two group exhibitions of photographic work preceded Gordillo's, both organized by the Ministry of Culture.



Figure 2. Claudia Gordillo, Catedral de Managua, 1981. © Claudia Gordillo

Transitioning between open and closed spaces, glancing through intersecting surfaces of broken walls, windows and doors, the eye comes to rest onto fragments of architecture and decorative detail, markings, scribbles and graffiti. The photographer's stated interest in Italian neorealist cinema may help place the series, her approach attuned to the characteristic all-embracing black and white aesthetic of scarceness transferred onto sites of post-war transformation, ubiquitous in the broader European context during its period of recovery. The Cathedral becomes an imaginary set, its *grand solitudes* ('las vastas soledades') to quote poet and critic Carlos Martínez Rivas, a cinematic backdrop for the development of a permanently delayed historic drama (Rivas 2). One may think of Federico Fellini's hallucinatory *Otto e mezzo* (1965), where the plot, following the protagonist's lifelines, drifts in and out of memory, at points where reality and fiction collide.

Close attention to surface and detail comes to characterize the entirety of the series. Of particular interest is the occurrence of graffiti scratched into the degrading facades, as marker of contingency. To quote again from Rivas' lyrical text, which was published in conjunction with the exhibition: 'Graffiti, con que la ociosidad de la pobreza enriqueció una CATEDRAL consagrada a la futilidad de una TIRANIA'. (Graffiti, with



which the idleness of poverty enriched a Cathedral consecrated to the futility of a Tyranny) (Rivas 2, emphasis in original). Graffiti and other types of impromptu street markings were instrumental in bolstering the resistance against the Somoza dictatorship during the 1978-79 insurrection, and in antecedent years. Some slogans denounced the regime, others claimed its victims as heroes, their haunting presence accompanied by the subtle yet eponymous silhouette of Augusto Sandino (see upper left in Figure 3, alongside an outline of Carlos Fonseca, one of the founders of the FSLN). Not only were these physical marks symbolic of the resistance, they also demonstrated citizens' solidarity in opposing Somoza's repressive regime, mobilizing the street as a vehicle for civil disobedience engaged in everyday affront.<sup>6</sup> In relation to Gordillo's overall approach, due to their reoccurrence, such tropes may be understood as conceptual devices, whereby the aesthetics of political dissent is articulated through the formal language of documentary photography, in an attempt to reconcile form and political content.



Figure 3. Claudia Gordillo, Graffiti, Iglesia de Sutiaba. León, 1980. © Claudia Gordillo

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<sup>6</sup> A large group of photographs documenting these ephemeral fragments can be found in: Ramírez, Sergio, Omar Cabezas, and Dora Maria Téllez. *La insurrección de las paredes, pintas y grafiti de Nicaragua*. Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1984.

While probing abstract geometries exposed by the dilapidated structure, the photographer nonetheless addressed her subject from an intimate perspective, one that to most contemporary viewers would have tenderly reignited a traumatic past. Whether captured as fragment or whole, the Cathedral would inevitably register photographically as an iconic image, its aide-mémoire surfaces materially inscribed in the historic record. This was a site of memory, and now of photographic memory, pointing to the oppression and neglect of the Somoza's regime. The ambiguities inherent in the work, their ideological 'softness', and the photographer's emphasis on formal aspects, such as compositional structure and tone, led to a first public debate concerning aesthetics and revolutionary ideology in Sandinista Nicaragua.

Gordillo's exhibition was criticized for its perceived reluctance to engage in the most immediate tasks of the revolution. In his review 'Arte para quién?' (Art for whom?), Rudolf Wedel, a fellow photojournalist at the official Sandinista daily *Barricada*, harshly objected to Gordillo's approach, which seemed 'vacía' (empty) and 'deshumanizada' (dehumanized); 'esta exposición no nos deja nada, no nos dice nada' (this exhibition doesn't leave us with anything, doesn't tell us anything), he objected (7). 'La estética de Claudia es más un *esteticismo*', he concluded, 'Un arte en donde predomina la forma, y el contenido se diluye en una cosa vaga y etérea. Un arte hecho para un público de iniciados en las cosas del arte, pero no de la vida'. (Claudia's aesthetic is *aestheticist*. An art outweighed by form, where content gets diluted into something vague and ethereal. An art made for a public accustomed to matters of art, but not of life.) (7)

Indeed, Gordillo insisted her photographs were the outcome of a formal rather than a symbolic exercise; that hers was an apolitical gesture, which sought to highlight a monumental ruin from a city that had tragically lost most of its architectural past. 'Me

atrajo la catedral desde el punto de vista estético nada más. No lo hice ni para contrarrestar la revolución, ni para resaltar nada. Era un juego estético, nada más' (The cathedral attracted me aesthetically, nothing more. I did not make [the work] to counter the revolution, or to highlight anything. It was an aesthetic exercise, nothing more.)

**(Gordillo)** The exhibition, 'se convertido en un problema político' (became a political problem), Gordillo recalled, 'hasta los comandantes de la revolución dijeron que esto era inaceptable' (even the revolutionary leaders said this was unacceptable), how had an official gallery of the Sandinista Front permitted this type of display? 'Yo regrese a Nicaragua con mucho interes en la revolución. Pero eso no quería decir que yo me voy a autocensurar a solo fotografiar cosas de la revolución', she confessed. (I had returned to Nicaragua with a great interest in the revolution. But that did not mean I was going to censor myself and only photograph issues related to the revolution.) **(Gordillo)**

Countering such critiques, Feminist writer Gioconda Belli published a sympathetic response, indicating that although Wedel's disapproval was directed at the author's thematic and stylistic approach, the real dispute involved the ideological content of the photographs. To quote:

Hay quienes piensan que el arte para ser revolucionario debe ser explícito, explicativo. [...] Apelar al simplismo para definir un arte popular, es caer en el populismo y en una sub-valorización implícita del pueblo. [...] En cuando a la segunda afirmación de que no plasma nada, excepto el mundo interior del artista 'que sólo a él compete', nos parece una afirmación sumamente peligrosa y que puede prestarse a confusiones. La Revolución no niega, en absoluto, el mundo interior de la persona.

(There are those who think that art, in order to be revolutionary, must be explicit, explicative [...] To appeal to such simplicity in order to define a popular art, is to descend into populism, and to implicitly underestimate the people. [...] In regard to the second claim, that it does not capture anything, except for the interior world of the artist 'which pertains only to himself', it seems to us that this is an extremely

dangerous claim, that can lead to confusion. The Revolution does not deny, absolutely, the interior world of a person. (Belli 3)<sup>7</sup>

Several response articles followed in subsequent issues of Sandinista news publications, mainly in *Barricada* under the sub-title ‘El debate ideológico’ (the ideological debate), also in *Ventana* and *El Nuevo Amanecer Cultural*. While the debate was prompted by Gordillo’s photographic series, the pictures were soon cast aside, as various cultural workers and commentators sought to address the complexities of aesthetic production in relation to the larger revolutionary process. Impassioned yet lucid, written in a collective voice, Belli’s text can be read as a pseudo-manifesto on the subject of ‘qué es y qué no es arte revolucionario y que esperamos del arte en la Revolución’ (what is and what isn’t revolutionary art, and what we expect from art within the Revolution) (Belli 3).<sup>8</sup> Responses highlighted a multitude of factors such as the urgency of social and political reforms, the scarcity of material and human resources, and intensifying outside pressures, which motivated contributors to work directly in service of the revolution—however not all were willing to entirely renounce their independent activity, or to relinquish their own political beliefs when these came into conflict with the official Sandinista agenda.

The exhibition revealed the emergence of divergent ideological positions, which were set on an imminent collision course. Wedel’s statement came in support of a programmatic definition of the role of photography, which prescribed a typological approach, exemplified most immediately by a genre of militant imagery that originated

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<sup>7</sup> Gioconda Belli had been a powerful critical voice throughout those vital years of transition. An internationally recognized poet and novelist, she became an active Sandinista while the resistance was still underground, and was forced to live in exile in Costa Rica during the 1970s. She was outspoken against the more radical, *machista* tendencies within the Front, resisting those that sought to enforce prescriptive forms, curtailing freedom of expression.

<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Margaret Randall wrote strongly in defence of an art that in addition to being responsive to politics: ‘puede, y debe, conmovernos’ (can, and must, move us) (Randall 3).

with the Cuban Revolution, albeit greatly influenced by the historic avant-gardes, and which had been mobilized throughout the global south. Not only did this recognizable type of imagery show solidarity with a greater cause, it also brought together the multifarious liberation movements throughout Latin America in a united visual front. Privileging content over form (the risk was to otherwise produce work that was ‘empty’ and ‘dehumanized’) denunciatory forms of social documentary often opted for straight approaches, descriptive *realisms*, which were nonetheless directed and driven by pathos, reactive to the urgent matters that they sought to expose, and transform.<sup>9</sup> Despite the commendable intentions of many of these photographers, their work often fell too easily into prefabricated molds of increasingly authoritarian state propaganda, providing an imagistic component to a greater rhetorical apparatus, and thus losing the very criticality it had originated in. Read in this vein, Wedel’s reprimanding review picks up a rather disquieting tone, only three years after the defeat of the dictatorship, veering away from the very diversity and range that the leadership of the Sandinista Front and of the Cultural Ministry sought to affirm through their support of cultural programs.

The early 1980s were fundamental to defining the agenda of the ASTC and its linked organizations. Placed directly within the hierarchy of a state whose ideology they sought to advance, Nicaraguan cultural organizations, although willing to foster an environment for participation and debate, were inevitably restricted in their approach. The principal venues for the presentation of photographic work in the country were *Barricada* and *Ventana*, the paper’s weekly culture supplement. Due to the demands of

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<sup>9</sup> For a fascinating discussion on photography and realism see Weissman on Susan Meiselas’ documentation of the Sandinista revolution. By contrast to what may be called realist tendencies in militant photography, with examples ranging from the post-war U.S.S.R. to post-revolutionary Cuba, Weissman writes about a type of realism that ‘functions as a generative force that prompts engagement—in the case of Meiselas, historical engagement as well as interpretative agency’ (Weissman 297).

the institutions they were employed by, many photographers, akin to other Sandinista cultural workers were only able to produce little independent work in this period. As U.S. artist Esther Parada has noted, based on observations from her visit to Managua in the summer of 1983: ‘the notion of photography as a form of personal expression is new in Nicaragua, and because UFN photographers all work as photojournalists, free-lancers, designers or lab technicians, they have less time to pursue personal projects than they would like’ (C/Overt 10).<sup>10</sup>

## Media Wars

About a year after her visit, Parada published an important analysis of the ideologically biased news coverage of the Contra War in the U.S. media. In the pages of the journal *Afterimage*, the text was paired with the author’s first-person account of photography related initiatives and activities encountered in Nicaragua.<sup>11</sup> The sample chosen for her case study consisted mainly of articles published by the *New York Times*, since the paper provided some of the most in-depth reporting on the subject, and on Central America in general. As the headlines, articles and accompanying photographs show, the conflict was often presented erroneously, reflecting the perspectives of international policy makers in Washington, rarely cognizant of the daily realities of life in Nicaragua, and blinded to the realities *on the ground* by the dominant anti-Communist

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<sup>10</sup> Female practitioners assumed prominent roles within the Sandinista administration, supervising the production of a range of visual cultural materials. Photography assumed a prominent role, as cultural workers sought to generate up-to-date content in support of the revolution, highlighting its advancement. The gendered politics of the cultural field during the 1980s in Nicaragua has been explored in some detail by Philippa Oldfield in her excellent dissertation.

<sup>11</sup> The physical layout of the piece, and an explanatory note from the editors clarify the author’s intentions: ‘The reader may choose to first follow the upper or lower text to its conclusion or alternate between the two’ (Parada, C/Overt 7).

rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> In her parallel examination of *Barricada*, Parada noted that the declaredly partisan newspaper did not seek to disguise its political agenda; neither did it present cosmeticized accounts of the struggles of the revolution, or of the challenges presented by the war—the fact that the debate around Gordillio’s exhibition was printed on its very pages is interpreted as a sign of the editors’ openness towards a plurality of opinions (C/Overt 11).

Compared to the *covert*, manipulative rhetorical and visual strategies employed by the U.S. media, the *overt* politics of the Frente’s official ‘propaganda organ’ come to signify democratic address: the newspaper recognizes the existence of opposing opinions, while continuing to promote its own, clearly stated, line of action. Notwithstanding the argumentative strength of the piece overall, most effective in its dismantling of the inherent bias in supposedly objective U.S. reporting, Parada’s assessment of the local Nicaraguan framework was based however on a small number of *Barricada* issues, not in the least problematic since media outlets in the country were subject to strict government control and censorship laws.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the question of censorship and the debate around Gordillo’s exhibition, Parada’s testimonial provides further insight. Having worked in the midst of

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<sup>12</sup> Several texts from this period discuss instances where photographs taken in Nicaragua were decontextualized, and their content manipulated by the international press. See: Ritchin, Fred. “The Photography of Conflict” *Aperture* 97 (1984): 22-27. Blacklow, Laura and David Bonetti. “Misshaping Media: The Uses and Abuses of Photojournalism.” *Art New England* February 1985: 10. Desnoes, Edmundo. “Six Stations of the Latino American Via Crucis.” *Aperture* 109 (1987): 2-13. Quintanilla, Raúl. “A Suspended Dialogue: The Nicaraguan Revolution and the Visual Arts.” *Third Text* 7 (1993): 25-34.

<sup>13</sup> Beginning in 1979, all local media were placed under government censorship. *La Prensa*, the second largest daily in Nicaragua and historically the most important opposition paper, was shut down repeatedly throughout the 1980s, accused of promoting an anti-Sandinista and pro-Washington agenda. In terms of war reporting, *Barricada* had exclusive access to army operations in the war zones, through its direct connection to the FSLN. While non-affiliated correspondents could reach these areas, the extent of their coverage depended on FSLN directives.

the photographic community in Managua for several weeks, she notes: ‘although UFN photographers have produced many photos reflecting militant attitudes or the actual mobilization of Nicaraguans against counterrevolutionary aggression, I saw no indication that artistic expression is limited to social realist content. In fact diversity is seen as an antidote to colonial and imperial influences’ (C/Overt 10). It is rather striking that in an article that demonstrates the one-sidedness of the representation of the Sandinista Revolution and the Contra War in the U.S. media, the author is short-sighted in her assessment of nationalist discourses in Nicaragua, despite the tightening of state control over visual information, which restrained less programmatic approaches.

For example, the statement ‘The fact that *Barricada* has become the establishment or official press does not remove conflict from its pages. These reflect the struggle to defeat external enemies and to solve internal problems’ (C/Overt 11), is illustrated by a photograph of a Sandinista soldier captured in the midst of battle, his swift movements registered at high shutter speed over a blurry background; the weapon is the one element of the picture that is in focus (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Leonardo Barreto, Un cachorro del Batallón 50-13 del Ejército Popular Sandinista momentos después de un combate en Quilalí, 1983. © INHCA, Universidad Centroamericana, Managua



The caption reads, in Parada's translation: 'After the enemy. This combatant runs to seek a new position. His expression portrays the degree of conscience and patriotic commitment with which our people assume the defense of the Revolution' (C/Overt 11). Credited to *Barricada* photojournalist Leonardo Barreto, the photograph was published in 'Corresponsales de Guerra, Testimonio de Cien Días de Sangre, Fuego y Victorias' (1983) a small book of photographs from the Contra War taken by the war division at *Barricada*, which was issued on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the revolution—as noted by Parada. Similar to the aforementioned example, the remainder of the photographs from the book aimed to demonstrate the resolve of the Sandinista army, and the general support of the population, despite the intensification of the war. The work of the *corresponsales de guerra* reaffirmed the importance of the newspaper as the official promoter of the revolution, showing the commitment of its reporters to providing in-depth coverage of the war notwithstanding the great personal risk.

Notwithstanding its ideological bias, Parada's position remains highly significant, as she was part of a vital community of U.S. citizens who actively opposed the foreign policy of the Reagan administration, even in the years leading up to the Iran-Contra scandal which erupted in the fall of 1986. Artist-run organizations, including most visibly *Artists Call Against U.S. Interventions in Central America*, had become increasingly involved in the peace movement, seeking to elucidate through their work the grave manipulations that affected public awareness about the Sandinista revolution and the political context in Central America. Furthermore, large numbers of international brigades, including U.S. cultural workers, were mobilized via solidarity networks, and traveled to Nicaragua on various tours and volunteering campaigns.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An account of such a tour was published by Laura Blacklow, illustrated with photographs by Peter Fougère, both of whom travelled to Nicaragua with a group of 160 U.S. artists at the

Lucy Lippard for instance spent several weeks in Nicaragua in 1984, and worked on a mural in Granada with a ‘gringo brigade’, as part of a larger commission supported by the ASTC in collaboration with the Boston branch of *Artists Call* and *Arts for a New Nicaragua* (107). Her published testimony included important observations on the margins of art practices in the country, organizational structures as well as key directions: ‘The two currently prevailing views of art and revolution maintain that revolutionary art can’t just be pretty, it must say something too; or that the best art is the most revolutionary art, whatever its subject’ (Lippard 107). As a follow-up, the critic included a short discussion of the exhibition ‘The Nicaraguan Media Project’, on view at the New Museum in New York between September 16 and December 8, 1984—the show represented an early formal attempt at critiquing the biased, if not entirely misleading portrayal of the Sandinista revolution in the U.S. media and in the international press.<sup>15</sup> While photographs were given precedence as autonomous aesthetic-political entities, their presentation went against conventional display, through the inclusion of contact sheets, tear sheets, and other context-enriching materials.<sup>16</sup>

Here again, the conversation returns to a critique of documentary images through their respective contexts of presentation. Parallel to the debate provoked by Gordillo’s photographs in Nicaragua, discussions concerning the use and misuse of formal aesthetic strategies in the making of political images surfaced in the U.S. Soon after the publication of Susan Meislas’ seminal book ‘Nicaragua, June 1978—July 1979’ in 1981, artist and

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invitation of the ASTC in July and August 1984. See Blacklow, Laura. “Nicaraguan Journal.” *Views: The Journal of Photography in New England* (Winter 1984).

<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth discussion of ‘The Nicaragua Media Project’ and Esther Parada’s involvement in the planning and conceptual layering of the exhibition, see Duganne.

<sup>16</sup> A similar DIY approach was chosen for the display of news pictures in the Artists Call and Group Material organized exhibition *Timeline: The Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central and Latin America*, on view at P.S.1 in Long Island City, New York between 22 January and 18 March 1984.

critic Martha Rosler published a searing review. She argued that the pictures were too voyeuristic, exoticizing, colorful—too much like *Art* (Rosler 246). Despite the book reflecting the photographer's desire to go against the limiting presentation of her images in mass media, its 'style', according to Rosler, had produced 'an anti-realist' effect (246). 'As "art" takes center stage, "news" is pushed to the margins', the critic wrote, chastising the material's inability 'to inform and mobilize opinion' (246). The review contributed to a line of critical discourse on photography that had developed alongside broader postmodern critiques of images and visual culture. Allan Sekula's seminal essay 'The Traffic in Photographs' (also published in 1981) is a prime example of the genre. Strong claims were made against authorial narratives and the aestheticisation of documentary material, especially against sentimental visual strategies that brought powerful photographic projects dangerously close to the line of apolitical humanistic (rather than human rights focused), and universalizing (rather than context-driven) rhetoric in photojournalism—most famously expounded in Edward Steichen's 'Family of Man' exhibition from 1955. The use of 'artistic' strategies in documentary photography, Rosler and Sekula argued, had failed to realize their intended purpose. Instead, the interference of aesthetics made it *easier* for images of atrocity to be commercially exhibited and sold alongside art.

### **Auteurial Gestures**

Gordillo worked as a staff photographer for *Barricada* between 1982 and 1984. Tasked to document the Contra war as part of the war photographers' division, she was the only female photographer embedded with the *Ejército Popular Sandinista* (Sandinista Popular Army or EPS). A great number of the pictures published during the war years are evidentiary, demonstrating military prowess, solidarity with the revolution, the courage, camaraderie, and resolve of the combatants. The division also covered civilian life, yet it

often delivered images that complemented the political views that the paper sought to convey—‘fotografía panfletaria’, propagandist photography, emotional, demagogic, as Gordillo would later explain (Gordillo).

The archives of *Barricada* preserve a significant number of work prints and contact sheets. However, the absence of a clear chronology, and the scarcity of accompanying textual documentation pose great challenges for researchers seeking to reconstruct the greater context around the pictures that made it through the editing process. According to Gordillo, the paper showed little interest in portraying the daily realities of life along the frontline, the difficult conditions, or the lack of resources (Gordillo). Black and white film was in short supply, color hardly available, and even photographic paper was difficult to find. Such limitations became even more drastic after the imposition of the U.S. embargo in 1985. Gordillo recalled how she generally carried two cameras, only one of which was dedicated to *Barricada* assignments (Gordillo). She would plan her exposures economically and, while seeking to obtain the pictures her editors had requested, she sought to record, as thoroughly as possible, the context around those frames. The majority of these photographs were *buried* within the newspaper’s archives, whether they documented entirely undramatic details from the lives of civilians caught in the midst of war, or controversial issues such as the relocation of the indigenous communities from the embattled regions along the Costa Rican and Honduran borders.

Removed from the pages of *Barricada* and from the corresponding archives, Gordillo’s work from this period can be viewed from a slightly different angle, one that explores her individual approach to documentary in continuity with her photographic practice as a whole. This is indeed an instance where the auteurial voice can add a greater, and more in-depth perspective to the interpretation of a politicized body of work. The photographer’s background was in fine art photography and art history, instead of

journalism, as was the case with most of her colleagues. She was drawn to the modernist devices of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, but also Tina Modotti and Alexander Rodchenko, and to the previously mentioned textured sensitivity of Italian neorealist aesthetics. Indeed, it might be obvious to point out that a project like Gordillo's couldn't have emerged in a vacuum, and that she worked in relation to this larger, transnational history of documentary photography, with which, like her contemporaries, she was well-acquainted. Yet such observations might indeed be less straightforward when historic work that is well-known and established in the Latin American context continues to remain obscure outside that region, even in an academic setting. While her reference points were locally specific, they were nonetheless guided by a deepening awareness of how the medium was being redefined on a global scale.

The legacy of Mexico is indeed present, in particular the influence of Álvarez Bravo, unmistakable amongst the interstitial urban spaces, making space for the lyrical and for the absurd alongside everyday streets and squares (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Claudia Gordillo, *Invocación*. Managua, 1981. © Claudia Gordillo

Her interest in the careful observation of daily routines and rituals, the investment into symbolic form—that is where Gordillo's photographs come closest to the work of Lola Álvarez Bravo, and her contemporaries Mariana Yampolsky and Graciela Iturbide.

These correspondences become even more striking in her photographs from the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, part of a lengthy documentary project that she began working on during the mid-1980s and continued throughout the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that each and every one of these female photographers contributed to altering former exoticized portrayals of rural and indigenous subjects in Central and South America. These had existed since Colonial times, and re-emerged more recently within *indigenismo* movements that sought to reposition pre-Columbian heritage in relation to modernising nation-building processes.

Gordillo sought to employ this history of art and aesthetics in her most immediate context, while working in a manner that was conscious of and engaged with contemporary international directions. ‘El documentalismo Norte Americano, Italiano, Europeo yo pensé que lo podría hacer aquí’, she commented in an interview, ‘porque nunca había visto este tipo de documentalismo [en Nicaragua]. Al menos yo no lo conocía’ (North American documentary, Italian, European, I thought I could make that type of work here; I had never seen that type of documentary. Or at least I wasn’t aware it existed [in Nicaragua].) (Gordillo) Similar to many of her contemporaries working in Latin America, she was well acquainted with the work of European and U.S. based post-war documentarians (most notably Robert Frank), and the Magnum ‘school’ of social reportage. Telling comparisons may be drawn for instance between her work from the early 1980s and Josef Koudelka’s pictures from the events of the 1968 Prague Spring as well as his documentation of Roma communities in Central and Eastern Europe—both

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<sup>17</sup> A significant group of photographs from the project were published in a photobook produced together with the photographer and film-maker Maria Jose Álvarez. Gordillo, Claudia and Maria Jose Álvarez. *Estampas del Caribe Nicaragüense. Portraits of the Nicaraguan Caribbean*. 2nd ed. Managua: IHNCA, 2008.

photographers sought to grasp the changing dynamics of class and privilege in unsettled social contexts, drawn to the outer expression of ethnic or subcultural identity.



Figure 6. Claudia Gordillo, *Damas granadinas*, Granada, 1982. © Claudia Gordillo

To take a more specific example, Gordillo described this 1982 street scene from Granada as edifying for the type of class conflicts that the revolution set in motion (Figure 6). Within the frame, the viewer's attention is directed towards the exchange of gazes between a working-class woman and a middle or upper class dame. Elegantly dressed, with a trace of lipstick on her lips, she stands in front of her former house, now confiscated, inscribed by the FSLN (Frente Sandinista) mark—this, the photographer recalled, was ‘el contexto de la lucha social, [...] silenciosa pero real’ (the context of social struggle, [...] silent but real) (Gordillo). It was soon after this photograph was taken, during the third anniversary of the Sandinista victory, that the debate concerning the ASTC exhibition took place.

Gordillo's interest in architecture, history and memory as expressed in her studies of the Old Cathedral deepened. A project that began with the exploration of vernacular typologies and street scenes, gradually entered lived spaces, social and private, observing the dynamics therein. This sociological perspective greatly affected the ways in which she approached the assignments with *Barricada*. Similarly, international documentary

sources, even if extraneous to her most immediate context were brought to bear onto her working process, impacting the pictures produced. One could argue that instead of the direct *appropriation* of popular visual culture (a strategy that came to characterize the work of artists from the Pictures generation in the U.S.) we see here an *appropriation* of aesthetic modalities, and of approaches to picture making, documentary and photojournalistic to be more precise. While ‘original’ sources may be harder to identify, the conceptual gamut and the visual strategies at play are much more easily recognized. In the pursuit of a novel and ‘authentic’ photographic vision, these aesthetic connections were not merely incidental. Rather, they were decidedly intentional.

### **Democratising culture**

Gordillo’s work participated in a movement towards the reclamation and affirmation of regionally embedded practices, which gained momentum with the founding of the *Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía*. Debates vis-à-vis the precedence of aesthetics over politics in the service of revolutionary idealism brought these areas together into a unifying although heterogeneous (and often dissenting) front. However, instead of proposing restrictively localized, and inflexible photographic tropes, whether in geographic or political terms, Gordillo and her contemporaries, appealed to international forms as a means to upturn the logic of the center—periphery debate whereby North American and European documentary and photojournalism still dominated the field.

Spearheaded by photographer Pedro Meyer and critic Raquel Tibol, and run in collaboration with key figures such as Pablo Ortíz Monasterio, Mario García Joya, María Eugenia Haya, Paolo Gasparini, Boris Kossoy and María Cristina Orive, the *Consejo* was formed in 1977 in Mexico City, with the mission to increase the visibility of Latin American photographic practices and to promote exchanges between practitioners



working in different national contexts within the region (Debroise 7).

The three colloquia organized by the *Consejo* in Mexico City in 1978 and 1981, and in Havana in 1984, were held in conjunction with sizeable exhibitions, which focused almost exclusively on documentary photography. The catalogue produced after the first encounter from 1978, a trilingual edition designed by Grupo Proceso Pentágono, included texts that sought to define the function of photography in society, with due consideration given to the question of aesthetics. In seeking to investigate the specificity of Latin American photography, the final selection of work included in the exhibition, the organizers explained, reflected both thematic range and shared commitments: ‘images of a journalistic, documentary or humanistic nature whose final objectives to explain and confront lead them to a participation in a conscious comprehension of the social, political and economic conflicts of our people’ (Meyer et al. 15).

With the second meeting held in 1981, as the textual records and visual accounts of the proceedings testify, conversations around the significance of photography as a social and cultural practice veered strongly towards political concerns. Under pressure from a hemisphere that was closing in politically due to the persistence of class conflict and authoritarian regimes, ideological questions were raised with increased urgency by the participants. In addition to numerous photographers and critics from Latin America, Martha Rosler and Max Kozloff were invited to participate from the U.S.—it is perhaps significant to note that Rosler developed arguments that would later feature in her seminal text ‘In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)’ and indeed one can see how these highly politicized cultural debates may have influenced her rationale.<sup>18</sup> In

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<sup>18</sup> Esther Parada was present at the Colloquium and has conveyed a uniquely comprehensive account of key aspects of the proceedings, as well as salient observations concerning the exhibitions presented alongside (*Notes On*).

his introductory remarks, Meyer would comment that the upsurge of socially committed photography was mandated by the urgency and immediacy of everyday living conditions. Contemporary photography he claimed, ‘es la respuesta que surge frente a esa “realidad” que demanda nuestra cámara’ (is the answer to the ‘reality’ that the camera demands we engage) (Meyer 10). While the emphasis in both occasions was placed on local and regional production, exchanges with both the American North and the European West were nonetheless acknowledged; Shifra Goldman commented that despite of all differences, the colloquia served an important role in connecting photographers and critics from the region, and was highly informative in bringing forth work that was little known, if not completely unknown outside (Goldman 37).

Reporting on the proceedings for the New York based *Aperture* magazine, Paul Tarsiers wrote: ‘this year’s event probed the dualism of photography as personal expression and as instrument of social change’ (Tarsiers 6). The notion that photography should function as an element of resistance on the one hand and as a committed form of art on the other, serving a social and ethical purpose (e.g. *fotografía de denuncia*) was not however universally agreed upon. Argentinian photographer Sara Facio, in a passionate address delivered at the Second Colloquium, argued that artistic freedom was not merely essential to the photographic process, in fact, it was the only means to create truthful and compelling documentary images that were also relevant to their context. Social and political change, she claimed, could only occur if supported by specific, and honest visual appraisals of the realities observed. Notwithstanding their political beliefs, most participating photographers agreed that a well-informed, critical eye was absolutely necessary if one was to contribute to projects of social reform. Facio however insisted in maintaining that the Left, in its militant stance, had failed due to the exclusionary terms in which it operated: ‘no se juzca la fotografía en términos estéticos’ she claimed

(photography is no longer judged in aesthetic terms) (Facio 105). 'No son buenas o malas, realistas o abstractas, clásicas o modernas. Simplemente sirven a la derecha o sirven a la izquierda' ([Photographs] are no longer good or bad, realist or abstract, classical or modern. Simplistically, they serve either the Right or the Left) (105).

A new chapter was opened through the meeting of parts occasioned by the Mexican colloquia, which were indeed planned so as to bring together photographers from disparate parts of Latin America, interested in investigating and communicating social problems, political abuses, and the inequalities that greatly afflicted the continent.

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In the late 1970s and early 1980s, parallel to artists' increased use of photographic images and imaging techniques, photographers became interested in bridging the gap between the 'fine art' world and documentary practices. The picture-story no longer constituted a credible source for collecting and conveying information, and the factual authority of images was relativized. As the work of photographers from the generation that followed 1968 attests, aesthetic 'concern' often seeks to purposefully alter the violence of an event before it has been recorded and transformed into an image. Immersed in the rapidly expanding media environments of the post-picture magazine era, these photographers began their careers with an image literacy that far surpassed that of their predecessors. Abandoning the heroics of World War Two black and white documentary, the 'new' documentarians sought more direct, engaging aesthetic means that would allow the insertion of criticality without compromising the evidentiary value of their work. Furthermore, already in the early 1980s, activist documentary photographers were conversing with audiences that were deeply affected by the consumption of images in the global village.

Although separate from the concerns of the Pictures Generation in the United

States, a complex critique of images (and of image-making) developed in Latin America during the same period. In both contexts, documentary photographers actively sought alternative means to subsist outside of image production industries, primarily media and advertising. I want to suggest that Gordillo's oeuvre, if considered in relation to the greater, transnational documentary project that emerged the late 1970s and 1980s, presents a compelling critique of global media culture in the postmodern context. Situated within a long history of social documentary practices that were politically grounded, yet not doctrinaire, a spatially dislocated, network-based approach allows us to reflect upon strategies for visual storytelling at the confluence of often-contradictory ideological beliefs. Most significantly perhaps, we are compelled to revisit our perspectives on the circulation of images of conflict via increasingly advanced technology and global communications systems in the context of late-capitalism.

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